

i-D

artist diana al-hadid is challenging assumptions about arabic women

The Syrian-born, Brooklyn-based artist tells i-D about her favorite power tools and her new solo show at OHWOW Gallery in Los Angeles.



"No! 'How are you?' is the one question you can't ask!" Diana Al-Hadid laughed when we met in her Brooklyn studio. "I'm on zero sleep." It was three days before her work was scheduled to be crated and shipped to Los Angeles for her new solo exhibition at OHWOW Gallery, which opened Saturday, and by her own admission she could have been more ready.

She had only just chosen a title for the show ("I'm notoriously really difficult about giving up titles"), and the works (huge dripping panels and sculptures) were still in progress. Her studio assistants were helping to apply gold leaf to a 30-foot-long arched wall as the Spice Girls played

in the background. "I always feel like there are things I have to solve right up to the bitter end. But there's a time when you just have to suit up. I actually have to put on a massive space suit for carving foam," she said, gesturing towards a crumpled hazmat suit on the floor.

Diana can talk about her process with an almost mystical intensity but she is also happy to go deep on the joys of working with concrete. Earlier, she had pointed out her favorite tools from her pegboard arsenal. There was a power drill with a bit the size of a narwhal's tusk, which she brandished with glee, a hammer and saw of every size, and nearby, her welding station complete with heavy-looking head-encasing metal masks.



Diana has had 19 solo exhibitions in nine years and won an even longer list of awards and grants. Her work, and her confidence with her materials and tools are impressive by any measure. Almost invariably, though, her accomplishments are held up to her heritage.

Diana was born in Aleppo, Syria and grew up in a "very Arabic" household in Ohio. (Most of her close family left Syria when she was five, before the crisis intensified.) And it's easy to see why critics tend to read a middle eastern taste for ornamentation into her work, which is often intricately carved and flecked with gold. But she, in turn, is equally insistent that her background is the least interesting thing about her work. It's not ever her frame of reference: the OHWOW Gallery pieces allude not to Islamic art but to European Old Masters paintings (in particular, an eerie Hans Memling painting of a woman encased in a mountain, which she revisits again and again) and the architecture of the Piazza San Marco in Venice.

"It's interesting to watch people think, 'Hmm, why is she dealing with Western culture? It would be more interesting if this were an Islamic screen,'" she says. "I challenge people. I'm interested in asking why people want that and why they can't see me claiming Western art as my own as well. Everyone in the world has a right to it."

But she's funny and frank about how different her upbringing was to her friends': "I put in my time. I wasn't allowed to go to prom, I wasn't allowed to have a boyfriend! All of my friends knew I had a very different world. So it's more that everything I do now is a product of my ancestry. I think that's a political enough statement: that I'm an Arab woman making sculptures. I wouldn't be making sculptures if I was living in Syria."

What Diana would rather talk about, what she thinks about, is process. Which partially explains her reluctance to give the show a title. "How to narrate [the work] to the rest of the world?" she asks. "That's a little less compelling for me. I'm really more interested in how it develops. That's more of a mystery to me than decoding any meaning." Her works themselves have always been worn their process clearly. Early in her career, Diana was celebrated for her ruin-like, room-filling architectural pieces — elaborate wooden structures that looked like post-apocalyptic cityscapes. But even those were often about methodology as much as physical form. "In one of my very early works, I made an upside cathedral by painting the soles of my feet. I danced a

waltz, and the footprints made a blueprint for the cathedral," says Al-Hadid. And more recently, when she began working with more anatomical forms, she sculpted busts while blindfolded.

The works at OHWOW Gallery are another step in the process. Some grew from existing works which had been sitting in her studio for months or years, and others grew out of tools or molds she had grown attached to. The central piece echoes the form of Diana's favorite, eerie Memling painting and features a sculpted clay head — a prototype used to cast her earlier bronze busts — floating body-less above a giant mountain-like mound. "I'm working with these pseudo-archaeological ruins of my old sculptures," she says. "It's a trip now, to see how it ends."

"Ground and Figures" is on view at OHWOW Gallery in Los Angeles now through May 16.

Credits:

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